

U.S. Labor's Conservative Role in Latin America

by SUSANNE BODENHEIMER

"Not one penny of CIA money has ever come in to the AFL or the AFL-CIO to my knowledge over the last twenty years, and I say to you if it had come in, I would know about it. . . . I take a great deal of pride in the work we've done overseas and I resent the fact that the CIA is trying to horn in on it and say that they have done some of it."

—GEORGE MEANY, President of AFL-CIO, denying charges of Central Intelligence Agency subsidies to AFL-CIO, May 6, 1967

IMAGINE, for the moment, that George Meany is incapable of telling a lie. Suppose that the AFL-CIO's expensive campaign to promote "democratic unionism" abroad—particularly in Latin America—is not being charged to the ever-expanding account of the "invisible government," are its motivations and methods so different from those of the CIA, and has Meany any reason to take pride in that campaign?

The apparatus of the AFL-CIO's Latin American program since World War II has been geared to a continuation of the Cold War. Through its principal instrument, the Inter-American Trade Secretariats of Workers (ITS), founded in 1951 to compete with leftist and Peronist labor organizers, the AFL-CIO has constructed a network of "free and democratic" unions throughout Latin America. This is supplemented by the International Trade Secretariats (ITS), which coordinate activities among unions in the same trade or industry throughout the world. The third agency of the AFL-CIO in Latin America is the

American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which brings together the resources of American labor, American business, and the U.S. Government.

Like official U.S. policy-makers, the AFL-CIO is ambivalent toward social change in Latin America and vacillates between a desire to win over Latin Americans with promises of gradual social reform and a tendency to rely on "safe"—military and oligarchic—forces which stifle even peaceful social progress. With one hand American labor holds out offers of education and financial aid, and simultaneously, with the other hand, wields the "big stick" of intervention.

A widely-advertised attraction of the AFL-CIO operation south of the Rio Grande is the AIFLD educational program, which has reached more than 60,000 Latin American unionists since 1962. Scholarships to the AIFLD Institute in the United States are awarded to the "star" pupils in local and regional AIFLD seminars, recruited and screened by AFL-CIO and ORIT representatives. After completing the three-month "advanced course" and returning to their own countries, the most promising students remain on the AIFLD payroll as "interns" for nine months.

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At the end of an unpaved road in the pleasant, rolling Virginia countryside, more than seventy-five miles from Washington, D.C., is the AIFLD Institute. Originally located in Washington, it was moved to Virginia, according to AIFLD officials, to provide a "more peaceful" environment for study. Students are without cars or bus service to "the monastery," as they have nick-named it, and are seldom exposed to the distractions of the big city. None of the students I met there spoke English and few seemed engrossed in their studies.

All AIFLD students major in anti-Communism, a subject which their instructors, some of whom are Cuban exiles, are well qualified to teach. According to the *AIFLD Report*, students from several countries spend more hours in the "democracy and totalitarianism" course ("democracy" American-style, "totalitarianism" Communist-style) than on any other subject. Through "role-playing" exercises, students gain practice in countering Communist infiltration. But while AIFLD graduates have acquired expertise in ousting Communists (or anyone who looks Communist to AFL-CIO advisers), they are ill-equipped by their AIFLD education to meet equally potent challenges from rightwing dictatorial governments or entrenched land-owning and business interests. Although ninety per cent of the land in Latin America is controlled by ten per cent of the landholders, land reform receives scant attention in the AIFLD curriculum.

Central to AIFLD's program is the premise, as its director, William Doherty, put it to the Council for Latin America (an American businessmen's group) on February 11, 1966, that "The great bulk of the 15,000,000 organized workers in Latin America think, want, and desire almost identically with their counterparts in the United States." On the dubious assumption that American unionism is exportable, AFL-CIO educators have focused on "bread and butter" issues—higher wages, better working conditions, more fringe benefits—to be obtained through the collective bargain-